

# Committee on Resources

[resources.committee@mail.house.gov](mailto:resources.committee@mail.house.gov)

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

## CONSERVATION STRATEGY FOR THE SWAN VALLEY, MONTANA

### Purpose

Welcome to our beautiful part of the world. I am Anne Dahl, and I work for Swan Ecosystem Center in the Swan Valley, about 25 miles north of here. Swan Ecosystem Center is an inclusive, nonprofit community group. We work in partnership with the Forest Service, and many other partners, on ecosystem management and education. I have four things I want to accomplish today. I want to:

Tell you how our community is participating effectively in public and private land management.

Briefly describe our hopes for Swan Valley forests.

Emphasize that all communities and ecosystems are different and that forests are in need of site-specific management.

Argue that both local experience-based knowledge and scientific data need to be considered in planning for forest health.

### Swan Valley

The Swan Valley lies between the Mission Mountains Wilderness and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. The valley ecosystem is a source of clean air and water and a popular recreation area for many Montanans. The Swan Valley has the most significant system of wetlands and riparian areas in the region. This densely forested valley is home to grizzly bears, bull trout, many rare plants and about 900 people who care deeply about the land. The valley is one of a few in the West where humans live successfully within a rich and intact ecosystem.

### Swan Ecosystem Center and Flathead National Forest Partnership

Through matching funds agreements with the Forest Service, Swan Ecosystem Center has an office and visitor center in the U.S. Forest Service Condon Work Center. We sell maps and firewood permits and we answer questions about trails and grizzly bears. We raise half the money for the backcountry rangers in the Mission Mountains Wilderness and the Swan Range, with its trails into the Bob Marshall Wilderness. We have two demonstration forests on national forest land that help people understand the role of fire in the ecosystem and learn how to protect their homes from wildfire. We offer numerous educational programs with the Forest Service and other partners.

Community members have written a landscape assessment of the Upper Swan Valley that combines scientific data and experience-based knowledge from local people. Public land managers bring technology and scientific information communities want. Longtime residents retain knowledge of how the ecosystem has functioned and changed over time. Both are needed to assess forest conditions and develop appropriate management strategies.

### Legacy of Checkerboard Ownership

Our community-based landscape assessment is the foundation for a valley-wide conservation strategy that includes all ownerships. The valley is divided in a checkerboard pattern, with the Forest Service and Plum Creek Timberlands managing most of the alternate square-mile sections. The state of Montana manages a smaller portion of the valley checkerboard. These checkerboard squares are visible from space. Recently harvested, Plum Creek lands are in young growth, while many Forest Service squares are now overcrowded and need management to reduce beetle infestations and unnatural fuel loading. With every other square mile recently logged, much of the national forest land is susceptible to wind throw. Yet the Forest Service is unable to offer small timber sales to salvage excessive blow down before it loses economic value and exacerbates the insect and disease problem. Although such salvage sales would be small, they would be significant for local contractors and the Pyramid mill in Seeley Lake. If we're going to reduce fuels in the Swan Valley, it's essential to keep the local mills open to process trees that are thinned.

### Divestment of Plum Creek Timberlands

Plum Creek Timberlands owns about 80,000 acres in the Swan Valley, about half of the land that can be managed for timber production. Plum Creek has begun selling its timberlands, some for Forest Service

acquisition and some for private residences. We have convened a stakeholders group made up of the Forest Service, other federal and state agencies, county governments, land trust organizations, environmental groups, community members, and Plum Creek to develop a coordinated strategy for protecting Plum Creek lands.

#### Coordinated Conservation Strategy

Working with Trust for Public Land, about 5000 acres have been acquired for the Flathead National Forest since 1998 using Land and Water Conservation funds allocated by Congress. About 1200 acres will be acquired in 2003. And the stakeholders group has identified and prioritized an additional 8000 acres for Forest Service acquisition in 2004 and beyond. We are also seeking Forest Legacy and Habitat Conservation Plan funds to ensure that sufficient land remains in the timber base, key habitats are protected, and lands are available for appropriate public access.

Swan Valley residents have donated over 3000 acres of conservation easements on 22 privately owned parcels through the Montana Land Reliance, demonstrating a remarkable personal commitment to retaining the valley's rural and wild characteristics. The Nature Conservancy also holds easements in the Swan Valley.

#### Swan Valley Community Forest

A Swan Valley community committee is meeting monthly to protect Plum Creek lands and develop a conservation strategy for managing local forests. Historically, the economy in the Swan Valley has been timber dependent. Managed responsibly, these forests could continue to supply products for the local mill and provide jobs for loggers, log truck drivers, mill workers, restoration foresters, and outfitters long into the future. But, if we are going to maintain an intact ecosystem and a rural way of life, the Swan Valley cannot withstand much more residential development. Far-flung development is the greatest threat to ecosystem integrity and our rural culture. It undermines the viability of the timber industry, and the cost of services stresses county governments.

As part of the Swan Valley conservation strategy we want to acquire Plum Creek land for a community forest to be managed for these core values identified by residents as most critical: appropriate public access, a sustainable timber base, and wildlife habitat. If properly organized, a community forest could help resolve the burden of checkerboard ownership mandated by Congress a century ago as part of the railroad land grant.

A Swan Valley community forest would test the potential for appropriate local land management, while including a broad range of national interests. We are not asking for local control. We want meaningful local participation by people who have intimate knowledge of the place. A community forest would allow citizens to maintain the rural and wild characteristics of the Swan Valley and provide a sustainable local economy. Swan Valley forests would be managed according to the specific needs of the local ecosystem. Management would mesh the knowledge of longtime residents with scientific data. It would be responsive, and specific, to the people and the place.